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In the industrial Midlands of England, the County Education Authority in Leicestershire County has jurisdiction over approximately 250 primary schools and 50 secondary schools. A child attending an infant or junior school works at his own pace, is creative and spontaneous, and learns on his own terms. Principals are given complete autonomy and may innovate or experiment without interference. Within this nonrestrictive system, educational issues are discussed with the Advisory Center, which is composed of educators who are available to consult with teachers. A problem exists because some of the schools in the county, particularly secondary schools, do not subscribe to this system of education. University admission is based almost entirely on difficult, standardized examinations, which children take at the end of secondary school. This report describes the classroom environment of two infant schools (for ages 5 to 7), two junior schools (for ages 7 to 11), one primary (infant and junior) school, and two high schools (for ages 11 to 15). (DO)

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LEICESTERSHIRE REPORT

The Classroom Environment

by

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For an American, a visit to Leicester is a unique experience--primary education in the public schools has found new dimensions here. The classrooms do not look like traditional American classes; a different type of learning is occurring, making new kinds of demands on teachers and children. In short, the classroom is a different place, and it is an environment in which many exciting things happen.

Leicestershire is a small county in the industrial Midlands of England, near the geographical center of the country. Most of the residents work in factories; outside of the city of Leicester most people live in industrial towns or villages which feed the big factories. Even in the most nearly suburban areas with large areas of private housing, the middle class element is still a minority.

The County Education Authority in Leicestershire has jurisdiction over approximately 250 primary schools and 50 secondary schools. This does not include the city of Leicester, which has a separate educational system. Classroom size is large, thirty to forty children per class, and school budgets are low. Many of the schools are quite small by American standards--100 of the primary schools have three teachers or less, and another 100 have between four and seven teachers.

During a two-week stay in Leicestershire I visited two Infant Schools (age 5 to 7), two Junior Schools (age 7 to 11), one primary school (infant and junior), and two high schools (age 11 to 15, the final school for those who leave school at the legal age of 15).

It is only by watching the children at work that a visitor can appreciate the meaning of Leicestershire education. The first school I visited was an infant school in an industrial town several miles from Leicester. Here most of the classrooms opened onto a wide central corridor which was used quite as much as the classrooms themselves. Along the whole length of the corridor were easels, workbenches, nature

tables, displays of paintings and collages. There was a "store" where two children sold cardboard cereal boxes, cookie tins, and candy bar wrappers for play money which had to be carefully counted and the correct change returned. Children moved in and out of the rooms and up and down the corridor freely and calmly. As I walked by, one little boy painting at an easel stopped to inspect a boat his friend was building at a nearby workbench, then went back to work.

Within the rooms much the same kind of activity was going on. At tables in the center of one room of five-year-olds, for instance, children were building with blocks or modeling with plasticine. At another table two girls were playing an elaborate game which they did not explain with a box of flat plastic shapes; they took turns carefully placing the pieces in their proper position. One corner of the room was the library corner, separated from the rest of the room by bookshelves. Here children were drawing and writing in their "diaries" or story books or working on their readers. Elsewhere children were stringing beads on a counting-board, stretching rubber bands on a peg board (to produce different shapes). Three little boys were counting a box full of colored cubes by laying them out end to end on the floor. Against the window there was a table with balances and weights on it; a group of children were trying to balance beans against screws. There was a dress-up corner and an area for water play as well. Altogether there were about thirty-five children at work on various projects.

This sort of scene was typical of the work I saw in the Infant Schools--a room full of interesting materials for the children to explore at their own pace. As one teacher put it, the best materials are ambiguous--they can be used for may purposes. By choosing their own uses (building with attribute blocks, or counting with weights) the children learn on their own terms. They are learning by manipulation, directed by their own curiosity and interest.

Such a classroom, with each child learning something different, looks quite unlike a traditional classroom with children sitting in rows. And it

makes different kinds of demands on the teacher. Instead of treating the class as a monolithic unit, these teachers were dealing with each child on his own educational level. For the direct relationship between the child and the manipulative material does not mean that the teacher becomes irrelevant; his role becomes even more subtle and important.

For instance, in the class of five-year-olds I observed, within half an hour the teacher had interacted in some way with nearly all of the children. She stepped into the corridor to comment on a little boy's painting, stopping off at the woodworking bench to see how the boat was coming. Inside the room she listened to two little girls read, wrote down words in a little boy's private dictionary for the story he was writing, looked over the shoulders of the shape-manipulators and the block-builders, corrected a page of sums for a little boy who had been working on arithmetic. The boys who had been counting blocks came over to report "there are twenty-seven blocks." "Is that all? I think you had better count again!" She walked over to a table where a group of children had built a tower with arches and turrets and suggested that they draw a picture of it before knocking it down.

Although the children can move back and forth from one activity to another, the teacher does exercise some influence, the extent depending on her own personality. "I like to make sure that each child reads to me at least every other day." one teacher told me, "but usually they want to anyway." "I don't like to suggest things for them to do unless they really can't decide," another teacher said. "Usually they know exactly what they want to do when they come in in the mornings." Some teachers manage to move aroung so naturally that they are nearly invisible. In one classroom a little girl asked me to stand up and see if I could see the teacher anywhere; it was a room with many separate areas blocked off by tables and bookcases. I finally spotted the teacher in one corner, stooping down to help a little boy working with magnets. "Thank you," said the little girl, "it's awfully easy to lose her."

There is a term for this system of letting the children plot their own course from one activity to another the "integrated day." Most people in Leicestershire do not like to use any labels because they tend to make a method seem static. But in this case the label is quite appropriate--here the child's experience is integrated, more continuous, more of a piece. There is no dividing line between work and play; and indeed for a five-year-old it is hard to distinguish between playing with a balance and working on weight and measurement problems.

The children's response to this freedom was reflected in the atmosphere of the classroom; a busy, constructive environment. The classrooms were filled with a busy hum--not silence, but not noise either. Children talked to each other about what they were doing. I watched two seven-year-old girls telling each other long involved stories about the building they had built together. When the teacher was occupied, children would ask other children for help in reading or spelling. This constructive interaction was particularly marked in schools that practiced vertical grouping, placing children of different ages in the same class. Here the older children took responsibility for the younger children. Since they were all at different stages of physical development it seemed natural to the children that they should be at different academic levels. The children felt free to ask and to give assistance among themselves.

One outstanding characteristic of Leicestershire Infant Schools was the creativity of the children's own work. I never saw children copying each other's drawing, or copying from a given model. In general the children approached their work with an easy, confident feeling. I watched one little girl paint half her paper with a very dense design of colors radiating from one corner. Then suddenly she changed her mind and covered the other half of the paper with handprints in bright colors. Another room I visited had a gigantic painting on the wall with animals placed at all different angles. Apparently, it had been painted by several children standing around a table. A sign under the painting said merely, "These are our animals, some of them are upside down."

With building blocks too I noticed a tremendous creativity and willingness to experiment. I watched three boys build a tower (made out of mathematical blocks intended for changing-base work, as it turns out). They soon developed a system of supports so that they could build thinner, more open patterns. Yet when after fifteen minutes of pain-staking building, one of the boys misplaced a block and sent the whole structure tumbling, the others were not angry or upset. They enjoyed building for the sheer process of it and accepted its risks. They were not overly concerned about the product they were producing and so could afford to experiment.

If the open, stimulating atmosphere of the classroom made greater creativity possible, it also had a profound impact on the children's behaviou . As the head of one school put it, "A naughty child is usually a bored child. We have very few behavior problems here." And in fact I was struck by the order and cooperativeness exhibited in all the schools I visited. On the few occasions when children were assembled together- for a story in the classroom, for a morning assembly, for physical education - there was complete silence and attention when it was called for. Children moving back and forth for lunch or for play were orderly and purposeful. There was no need for a teacher to stand in the corridor telling them to be quiet.

This self-regulation was evident in many ways. Even in the Infant Schools, teachers left their classes every morning and every afternoon for a 15-minute coffee break. In good weather the children would play outside; in bad weather they could read comics or play games. One teacher was on general duty for emergencies but for all practical purposes the children were functioning perfectly well without supervision. The same trust was evidenced in the classroom; woodworking benches were in the corridor in one school I saw, out on the terrace in another. It was assumed that five-year-olds could handle saws and hammers sensibly and would follow rules without someone looking on - and they did.

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The Junior School classrooms I visited were similar to these Infant Schools, although the use of individualized techniques is newer and less complete there. Some Junior School teachers do a full integrated day; others prefer to give the children free choice for part of the day and supply more direction for the other part. The range of activities available to the older children is broader and more complex, and by the end of the Junior School (age 11) there is considerable pressure for the child to exhibit certain defined skills such as arithmetic or reading.

Given these constraints, many Junior Schools in Leicestershire have gone remarkably far in carrying on Infant School techniques with the older children. One junior school I visited on the outskirts of the city had vertical grouping, so that each class of thirty-five to forty contained children of all ages between seven and eleven. The children normally stay with the same teacher throughout, so that there is a solid community to receive the new children each year.

In this school the first hour and a half of every day was devoted to a free situation. After the coffee break the children were given more direction. Each table of children would have a choice of activities within a certain category, such as math, writing, or art. In the afternoon each teacher determined the amount of freedom to give his own class.

The free hour-and-a-half in a Junior School looked quite a bit like the unstructured situation in an infant school inasmuch as there were children in different parts of the room carrying on different activities. There were roughly the same activities, drawing, writing, clay, arithmetic, painting, building, except that these children, being older, were doing more sophisticated things.

For example, in one classroom there were four girls working on a multimedia circus, partly drawing and partly collage, being laid out on one of the desks. At another table two boys were making a ship and a lighthouse,

building the ship out of cardboard boxes, the lighthouse out of a cardboard tube, and wiring both with bulbs to concealed batteries. At another table some children were using modeling clay to form a pot by swirling strips; others were making a model of a primitive hut with clay and pebbles. Both projects were inspired by some reading they had done on primitive men. Elsewhere several children were at work on a model village - almost everyone had made stand-up paper houses which were glued into streets; some girls had decided the village needed trees and were working on them. One little girl was sitting quietly in a corner sewing; several other children were reading. In one corner a lively game was going on with the number-shaker. Several children were building with blocks.

It was interesting to notice how completely the children mixed in this vertically-grouped class. Except for differences in size, there was no demarcation between children of different ages. The younger children were not restless, the older children were not embarrassed to play or get involved with materials. When the teacher called for attention to announce clean-up, a very big boy who was building with blocks chose to look at the teacher by peeking through a window in his tower.

The same absorption in what they were doing was even more apparent in another class I visited. Four ten-year-old boys had just discovered that the pipes which ran through their classroom were metal and would conduct electricity. Terribly excited, they rushed around the room collecting pieces of wire, trying to figure out how to make a circuit long enough to connect to a battery and bulb. Then they realized they could even make a circuit from the bottom of the stairway up into their classroom and could send signals by Morse code. They were oblivious to me and to the rest of the class as they experimented, traced the pipes, tested them. There were completely unselfconscious, in the midst of important discoveries.

In this class the subtlety of the teacher's role was even more evident. He looked on as they worked, helped them find bits of wire, gave them unspoken approval. But he did not interfere. The children came to him and he was available to help them, but the search and the discovery were their own.

The culmintation of the classroom environment as I observed it in these Infant and Junior schools came in a village primary school which had many unique features but was a kind of logical extension of these other schools. The population of this village is about 250; although the countryside is rural, most of the men work in nearby factories. The school had forty-five children from five to eleven years old; there were two teachers and three rooms. This, of course, is a considerably smaller class size than is found in most of the country. Part of the freedom of this school is due to the isolation of the village and its small size. But the practices of this school have their roots in the other schools of the county and are applicable anywhere.

The children were divided into two groups--Infants and Juniors. The work done with the younger children was typical of the best work in Infant schools; there was a lot of opportunity for exploration and experimentation by the children. The older children had a fully integrated day; at any one moment there were children at work on widely different subjects of their own choice. But in addition to individual work with materials the class had several common projects in which all the children shared.

One of these projects was the Island. On a long table there was a papier-mache model of an island, with its parts labeled--"This is the road the settlers built to pull logs to the shore." It is an imaginary island which the children have placed in the Indian Ocean, and they are inventing a history, anthropology, and nature survey for it. The island was originally inhabited by two native tribes, for which the children worked out overlapping written languages, domestic and farming tools. In 1773 the island

was settled by Captain Cook; the children wrote accounts of the hardships of the settlers, their battles with the natives, their attempts to find means of subsistence. Now, having driven the natives into the mountains, the settlers are trying to build houses and start farms. While I was visiting, two girls were trying to build model houses; if successful they were going to construct a larger model on the playground.

Another on-going project is the River Study. The children are studying the river that runs through their village, measuring its depth and rate of flow at different points, charting its course with instruments their teacher helped them build. He hopes they will eventually decide to trace the river to its source nearby. At the same time they are studying the wildlife of their area. There is a tape recorder in the classroom where the children report any animals or birds they have seen. Two children transcribe these reports and plot them on huge charts.

Last year the children did a study of their village. They traced the history of old buildings; they found out what life used to be like by tape recording interviews with old residents, including an 86-year-old blacksmith. The interviewed all the present residents and made charts showing where people were born, and where they worked.

These projects are particularly remarkable because they have been planned and carried out by the children themselves. The children decided settlers should land on their island; they found history books, maps, and other background materials on their own. They will decide where to carry the river survey. Obviously the teacher suggested things at some point; such remarkable projects indicate imaginative guidance. Yet neither the children nor the teacher perceive these as the teacher's projects; they belong to the children. While I was there I did not see any attempt to lead or push the children in any way. This, then, is an extension of the teacher's new role as I observed it in the other

schools. The teacher is a resource person for the children. And the gifted teacher can stimulate remarkable projects without direct interference in the children's discoveries.

If this village school has gone far toward a more subtle definition of the teacher's role, it has also expanded the idea of the school itself. A Leicestershire classroom, as we have seen, is not a confining space but leads outward to paths to be explored. Spatially, the classrooms overlap and expand into corridors, terraces, work areas, the outdoors. The village school has gone one step further--it has expanded into its whole environment. Interviewing villages took the students into the village; bringing the tape recordings back brought the community into the school. Children working on the river study spent most of their time outdoors, that is, where their subject is. And this school has its own forest plot, where all the children go once a week to spend an afternoon planting trees or chopping wood or gathering plants for nature study. The classroom, in other words, comprehends everything of interest, and learning takes place where the interesting things are. I realize how well the children understood this new definition of the school when a little boy told me about an archaeological site down the road. He said there was a little hut near the excavation itself. "It's probably their classroom," he said. "You know where they go to look things up to use in their work." And of course for these children the classroom was a place where they looked up facts about explorers for work on their island of facts about surveying to use in their river study.

The richness of the educational experience of these children in the village school is the end-product of the kind of work I saw in all the classrooms I visited. Above all, there was in a Leicestershire classroom a feeling of possibility, of interesting things waiting to be discovered. The children were busy, creative, interested in what they were doing. The teachers gave help and support but left the children enough room to make their discoveries on their own.

One of the most important elements in this constructive atmosphere is respect for and trust in children as individuals. The teacher has to respect the child enough to believe he is doing something of importance to himself even if it looks to the teacher like wasting time. This trust is reflected in the freedom to come and go, the responsibility of being left alone during breaks.

One teacher who worked in Cleveland this summer stressed the importance of human dignity as the key to the creative classroom environment. "In Cleveland when they brough a new child into a class they said, 'Here's another one", as if she was a chair or a book. Here we say, 'Miss Smith, this is Sally Jones.'" A creative learning situation demands respect for the child's individuality.

There are several elements in the Leicestershire educational system which contribute toward this unique classroom environment. Many people in the county attribute classroom success to the policies of the Director of Education (corresponding to Superintendent of Schools). In Leicestershire each Head (or principal) has been given complete autonomy in his own school. This freedome to run their schools as they see fit means that a principal can feel free to innovate or experiment without interence. Many Heads respond by extending similar freedom to their teachers. "I encourage each person to teach according to his own style and personality," one Head told me. "I can't tell what is the right way for a given individual." And, as we have seen, this encouragement of individuality is the essence of the classroom environment.

Within this non-restrictive system, discussion of educational issues is stimulated by the Advisory Centre, a group of educators who are available to consult with teachers. They come into schools by invitation only; they have no administrative or evaluative role. In the schools where I saw them at work, advisors brought in new materials, consulted with teachers who were having difficulties, listened to and commented on projects, and in general circulated information about interesting things that teachers were doing in other parts of the county.

There are several other administrative features which contribute to the success of classroom work. Teachers are encouraged to visit other classrooms, both in their own school and in other schools. In one school I visited the Head who regularly took charge of classes for teachers who wanted to visit; in addition, one of the Advisors spends all her time relieving teachers and Heads for visits to other schools.

During vacations, the county holds various "courses," non-credit workshops that last for several days where materials are demonstrated or problems and issues are discussed. Although teachers have to pay to attend these, they are quite successful, and quite a few teachers pointed out materials or projects which they had learned about on a course.

Like every other school system, of course, Leicestershire has its share of problems. From an outsider's point of view, one of the most serious problems is the question of evaluation. One of the Heads I talked to commented that it is difficult to measure the kind of progress the children are making. "You can't prove it," she said. "Sometimes you can't even see it." The Leicestershire classroom tries to encourage qualities like curiosity and creativity, believing that other important qualities will flow from these. And it is very hard to measure such characteristics.

This lack of documentation is a problem only for those who are worried about, however. One person reminded me that a problem is a state of mind. Children going on to more formal schools sometimes "develop" problems over the course of the summer--what the junior school considers a normal situation, the high school may consider a problem. Thus, one Head told me that the next school thought here children had a problem--they cannot sit still for long periods of time. "And why should they?" she asked.

Thus, the problem of evaluation depends on one's frame of reference. There are objective measures like reading scores, and Leicestershire children seem to score about as well on them as children from more formal schools. Educators in Leicestershire do not like to talk

about this sort of evaluation at all. How can you measure the kind of learning that is going on in the village school I visited? "You know when you're doing the right thing with children," one of the Advisors told me. And in fact the Advisory system and the closeness between Head and teachers means that there is a kind of direct human evaluation going on all the time. The Heads and Advisors do not have to look at test results because they have the children in front of them.

One very real problem in Leicestershire is the fact that not all schools are run like those I have been describing. In particular, secondary schools have been very slow to accept any sort of free atmosphere. Pressure for achievement in Britian is even stronger than it is in America because there is even more rigorous competition for places in college. University admission is based almost entirely on difficult, standardized examinations which the children take at the end of secondary school. These exams really dominate the curriculum from the time the children enter high school at the age of twelve. Thus, a child who has attended an Infant School and a Junior School which allowed him to work at his own pace, and encouraged creativity and spontaneity, might suddenly at the age of twelve have to learn to sit in a quiet, straight lines, stand up when the teacher enters the room, wear a school uniform. The secondary schools are in danger of destroying everything the primary schools have accomplished.

Of course, the secondary schools are changing too. In fact, it is only within recent years that the free atmosphere of the Infant School has been extended to the Junior Schools. The eleven plus examination used to throw the same shadow over the Junior Schools that college entrance exams now throw over the secondary schools. Several years ago Leicestershire abolished the eleven-plus exam, sending all children together to the next stage instead of separating academic and technical courses. This experiment is now being followed all over England, and the subsequent liberation of the Junior Schools is an example of the potential which exists for innovation if external constraints are removed.

One problem which I expected to find in Leicestershire was not present--the problem of school-parent relationships. By keeping parents informed and making them feel welcome to come in to the school at any time, even the most radical schools have very few complaints from parents. The Head of one school that recently initiated vertical grouping told me, "I told the parents, if you have any doubts, come talk to me. And to those who came I said, give it a try for a term and if you are still unhappy, come back. None of them have come back."